

Berbagi Suami (Love for Share): The Discourse of Polygamy in a Recent Indonesian Film^[1]

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Prologue

1. This article considers *Berbagi Suami* (Love for Share), a post-New Order Indonesian film written and directed by an Indonesian female director, Nia Dinata, in 2006. The film brings together the separate stories of three different women (Salma, Siti and Ming) who live in polygamous marriages in a modern city, Jakarta, Indonesia. Although there is no accurate data on polygamous marriage in Indonesia in either official statistics or polygamy studies, Dinata estimated that about 10 per cent of households in Indonesia are polygamous.^[2] Indeed, polygamy has become a much more openly practiced form of marriage since the post-New Order era and is a matter of vigorous public debate.
2. Polygamy is an issue of debate particularly with respect to power relations between the genders. In fact, the use of the term of polygamy refers here to polygyny because the practice of polygyny is more widely practised and more accepted than polyandry.^[3] In this article I will use the term polygamy, even though polygyny would be more literally accurate, because polygamy (*poligami*) is the term commonly used in Indonesia. It could be argued that if practicing polygamy is a right then gender equality would demand that not only a man but also a woman would have the right to have more than one spouse. On the other hand, if only polygyny is practiced in a community then the state should clearly legalise (or forbid) it to protect wives and children especially in relation to property and inheritance. This article does not engage directly with these arguments but rather explores the representation of the issue in one film.
3. The portrayal of such a controversial issue in *Berbagi Suami* is linked with the nature of post-New Order Indonesian film industry where a great variety of themes are being explored.^[4] The new regime is enabling young filmmakers to produce films without government approval and the LSF (censorship board) has weakened its criteria for releasing films. These conditions meant that *Berbagi Suami* was produced in hospitable circumstances. Polygamy would have been impossible to represent on film in the New Order era. As Krishna Sen has observed 'cinema in Suharto's New Order allowed little space for experimentation.'^[5] Under Suharto there was a relatively small Indonesian film industry, tight censorship and monopolised distribution.
4. One dimension of the new film industry is the changes that are evident in the representation of gender and sexuality in film. Writing of the New Order era, Sen stated that 'the majority of the genres of Indonesian films are, by definition about men and what the films defines as men's sphere of action.'^[6] Sen observed that although there were female characters, they tended to be placed in subordinate roles and as a part of men's action. Similarly, New Order Indonesian cinema tended to represent gay characters negatively.
5. Conversely, in post-New Order Indonesian cinema, the discussion of women's issues and sexuality has flourished. In 2003, Nia Dinata wrote and directed *Arisan!* (The Gathering), a satirical comedy that portrays a gay relationship and women's unhappiness in marriage—the first Indonesian film to portray gay characters in a positive way. In 2006, *Cinta, Realitas dan Rock 'n Roll* (Love, Reality and Rock n' Roll) directed by Upi Avianto depicted the relationship between a son and his single-parent transgender father. In the same year, Nanang Istiabudi directed *Detik Terakhir* (Last Minute) which represents a lesbian couple struggling with AIDS. These films are just a few examples of the breadth of issues being explored.

6. This article explores how discourses about women and polygamy are constructed in *Berbagi Suami*, the first film in post-New Order Indonesian cinema to openly discuss this issue and to take position, albeit softly, in opposition to the practice of polygamy.[7] This is done through an examination of how the main women characters negotiate their polygamous relationships. These negotiations are linked with their reasons for accepting polygamy and decisions to stay in the polygamous marriage or not which are in turn influenced by the dynamics of power relations between husband and wife in the film. In addition, in this article I discuss contestations over polygamy in the film as they relate to religion, culture and economic independence.

Three women, three (polygamous) stories

7. *Berbagi Suami* consists of three different stories, told sequentially, that centre on three main women characters. Each has a different social, cultural and economic background. As a result, their feelings and experiences in dealing with polygamous marriage differ.
8. The film starts with Salma's story. She is a successful gynecologist who comes from a high-class Javanese faithful Muslim family. Salma (played by Jajang C. Noer) is married to a businessman-turned-politician, Pak Haji (El Manik) and early in the film finds out that her husband has a second wife, Indri (Nungki Kusumastuti), who he keeps in a separate household.[8] The story then moves to a period ten years later. Salma's only son, Nadim (Wingky Wirawan), has become a cynical young man who criticises his father's practice of polygamy and his mother's acceptance of it. Salma's polygamous marriage becomes more complex when Pak Haji's secret third wife, Ima (Atiqah Hasilohan), appears with her baby when Pak Haji has a heart attack. Taking care of Pak Haji together creates competition and rivalry amongst the wives although Salma as the first wife has more privilege—and more authority—than the others. On his death bed, Pak Haji makes Nadim promise to have only one wife since having many wives creates major problems. At the end of the film, Pak Haji dies and a fourth wife (Laudya Bella) suddenly appears with her baby at the funeral. Her appearance shocks Indri and Ima, but not Salma and Nadim who are now experienced in dealing with the surprises that Pak Haji as father and husband has brought into their lives.
9. Salma's story stages explicit the debate about polygamy in Indonesia both in the family (in dialogue between Salma and Nadim) and in the public domain of religious debate (Salma appears on a TV talk show in discussion with a female Muslim academic who opposes polygamy). The film shows that although Salma accepts polygamy, this decision causes her personal suffering. She does make Pak Haji accept some of her terms and maintains a career and an independent life. Salma's negotiation of polygamy thus reflects both acceptance and resistance in dealing with polygamy. Finally, Pak Haji's heart attack and his regret are metaphors for the dangers of having several wives. The end of Salma's story opens Siti's story, the second story of *Berbagi Suami*. Salma has to examine Sri (one of Siti's co-wives) who is accompanied by Siti, to get advice about family planning methods.
10. Siti (Shanty) is an innocent Javanese village girl who dreams of being a beautician. When she comes for the first time to Jakarta, Siti expects a better life since Pak Lik (Lukman Sardi), her 'uncle,' has promised to send her to a beauty school.[9] After moving in to their household and accepting Pak Lik and his wives' polygamous proposal, Siti becomes Pak Lik's third wife. Siti, Sri (Ria Irawan) and Dwi (Rieke Dyah Pitaloka) are not only sharing a husband, but also children, domestic chores and the financial support of the family's twelve members (the wives take in laundry). However, the notion of being part of a 'weird' family where three women live under one roof serving one husband disturbs Siti. Siti's survival is based in her growing intimacy with Dwi. One night, when Siti has to help Sri deliver her baby, Pak Lik comes home from Aceh with Santi (Janna Sukasah), his newly acquired fourth wife. The realisation of Pak Lik's insensitive behaviour and ignorance leads Siti to explore the possibilities of freedom and choice in life by pursuing a female-to-female relationship with Dwi, one of her three co-wives. The end of this story portrays Siti and Dwi (including her children) running away from Pak Lik's house together to start a new life.
11. Siti's story shows explicitly the material and cultural setting of many polygamous households in which all the members live together in the same house. In addition, without direct discussion

about polygamy between the husband and wives, this story shows Siti's suffering in dealing with her polygamous marriage especially when her husband takes a fourth wife without her consent. Further it shows sisterhood among the wives and thus enables the exploration of women loving women in Javanese culture. Finally it shows Siti and Dwi's decision to leave their marriage setting them free from a polygamous over-crowded household. In short, Siti's story shows the possibility of escaping the social, cultural and financial frameworks that both legitimise polygamy and, while creating the opportunity, minimise intimate relationships between women. Siti's courage in escaping from the polygamous marriage ends her story. In the early morning, with a lot of bags in their hands and the children in their arms, Siti and Dwi run away from Pak Lik's house. Their departure coincides with Ming's return to this slum area. Siti, Dwi and her children leave in the same taxi that brings Ming's return.

12. Ming's is the last story in the film. Ming (Dominique) is a very attractive Chinese-Indonesian girl who wants to be a movie star. Ming works as a waitress in a roast duck restaurant owned by cook Koh Abun (Tio Pasukodewo) and his wife, Cik Linda (Ira Maya Sopha), the cashier, both Chinese-Indonesians. Ming is always surrounded by male customers notably Firman (Reuben Elishama), a young film director, but she chooses to have an affair with Koh Abun. Having difficulty in controlling his jealousy and desiring Ming's exclusive attention, Koh Abun proposes that Ming be his *istri simpanan* (secret second wife). Ming accepts the proposal and they travel to a different city to marry. Once married, Ming lives in a new luxurious apartment and drives a brand new car. Ming feels comfortable getting whatever she wants from Koh Abun until Firman reminds her to pursue her acting dreams. After being attacked by Cik Linda and her daughters when they discover she is their husband's and father's second wife, Ming learns that Koh Abun is planning to move to the United States. He has been applying for a visa for years but has never told her. Losing Koh Abun (including his apartment and car) gives Ming the courage to believe in herself. At the end of Ming's story, also the end of *Berbagi Suami*, she is shown returning to her old rented house in the slum area, from where Siti and Dwi have escaped, to start her 'new' life.
13. Ming's story in *Berbagi Suami* highlights the need of a young woman to have financial security, which is not easy to achieve on her own. Being a secret wife was a conscious choice to help her to deal with poverty and socio-economic uncertainty. The film's closing, however, shows that independence is more valuable than dependence in a polygamous marriage, even if this choice is a difficult one. The film concludes that for Ming, and also for Siti, polygamy is a thing of the past.
14. The stories of Salma, Siti and Ming show the complexity of living in polygamous marriages in Indonesia. The diversity of stories shows that each woman negotiates differently the feelings and experience of being a wife in a polygamous marriage. Interestingly, all three main women characters end up out of polygamy, each via a different ending: the death of the husband, a choice to leave and abandonment by the husband.

Polygamy that matters

15. Although the three women characters' stories cannot represent all polygamous families in Indonesia, their slices of life can symbolise the variety of polygamous practices. Thus, *Berbagi Suami* shows a cross-section of different forms of polygamous marriage set in different social, cultural and political backgrounds, referencing not only cinematic discourse but also the social practice of polygamy in Indonesia.
16. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world, the practice of polygamy tends to be associated with Islam. In fact, as Susan Blackburn has asserted, polygamy was practiced before the arrival of Islam in Indonesia.[10] Historically, in the Indonesian archipelago, polygamy was permitted by a number of different *adat* (customary legal system) and practiced amongst the Hindus, Chinese Indonesian and Javanese elite classes.[11] Against this background, *Berbagi Suami* provides three stories with different religious backgrounds. Salma's story represents polygamous marriage in a faithful Muslim family, Ming's story shows polygamy in a Chinese (non Muslim) Indonesian community and Siti's story reveals the practice of polygamy in a family which echoes older Javanese cultural practices. Siti's household, where

all members of the polygamus family live together, mimicks the lives of the King and his wives in the history of the Javanese Kingdom. The solution to polygamy in Siti's story, a female-to-female relationship, also echoes the Javanese kingdom where it has been argued that polygamy created female intimacy and homosexuality amongst wives.[12]

17. Although historically polygamy has not only been practiced by Muslim communities, Budi Radjab argues that the arrival of Islam in the Indonesian Islands in the beginning of the thirteenth century strengthened the practice of polygamy while also limiting it because Islam allows a husband to take only four wives.[13] According to Djamil Gunawan, using Islam to justify the practice of polygamy has become widespread in Indonesia.[14] The justification comes from the third verse of the Qur'an in Surah An-Nisa (about women) that is interpreted to legally allow polygamy. There are two reasons used to justify polygamy. First, it is claimed that polygamy fulfills the sexual needs of husbands because sex outside marriage is *haram* (prohibited by Islamic law). (This reason is applied in Salma's story when Pak Haji's reason for practicing polygamy is to avoid *zinah* (adultery) which is prohibited by Islamic law.) Secondly, polygamy is a husband's right as the family leader and breadwinner.[15] While Islam is the most common source of justification for polygamy, there is disagreement about the verses in the Qur'an. Some people interpret them to mean that they legally allow polygamy, while others claim that the verses can be interpreted to mean that polygamy needs justice and if a man is to be just then he must have only one wife.[16] These pro-contra arguments appear in *Berbagi Suami* when Salma argues with an anti-polygamy activist in the TV talk-show scenes.
18. Alongside debates about the interpretation of the Qur'an, polygamy has been a controversial issue throughout Indonesia's legal history. In 1973, Indonesia passed a Marriage Bill that restricted polygamy and permitted mixed marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims.[17] Strong opposition from pro-polygamy groups led to the ratification of Law No 1 of 1974 on Marriage that permits polygamy but prohibits mixed marriage.[18] Where classical Islamic law allowed a man to marry another wife without the consent of his existing wife or wives, the 1974 Marriage Law allows a man to practice polygamy only if he fulfils the requirements set out in the law and obtains permission from *Pengadilan Agama* (the Religious Court). To obtain permission under this law he must show approval from his wife or wives, guarantee to provide the necessities of life for his wives and children, and act justly in regard to his wives and children.
19. Since legal polygamy is not easy to obtain, most polygamous marriages are practiced secretly through *kawin siri* (secret marriage). This type of marriage is legal under Islamic Sharia Law but illegal under state law. Although recognised by the religious figure who performs the marriage, it is not ratified by the state. Another type of polygamy is *kawin diam-diam* (secret marriage) where the man falsifies a *KTP/Kartu Tanda Penduduk* (identity card) to marry another woman in a religious court in another town. This is possible because Indonesia keeps no national data on marriage.[19] Polygamy that is ratified by both religion and the state is rare in Indonesia compared to polygamy which is practiced without state sanction, making it difficult to track the frequency and incidence of all polygamous unions.
20. In Salma's and Ming's stories in *Berbagi Suami* polygamous marriages are practiced without the consent of the existing wife or wives. In Salma's story, Pak Haji marries three additional wives without asking permission from Salma. That is, Pak Haji practices *kawin siri*, allowed by Islamic law but not recognised by the state. Koh Abun, who is not Muslim, practices polygamy by falsifying his identity card and marrying Ming in a different city. Only Siti's story presents an Islamic marriage that meets legal requirements for polygamy: the other wives' consent, a family witness and an officer from KUA (Religious office).
21. The tendency for husbands to practice polygamy without the consent of the wife or wives, either by practicing secret marriage or practicing double marriage by falsifying an identity card, is documented in the most up-to-date information about polygamy in contemporary Indonesia. [20] LBH Apik, an NGO concerned with women's issues and justice in Jakarta, has stated that twenty-one polygamous marriages of forty-eight reported to them are practiced as secret polygamous marriages.
22. In July 2003, Puspo Wardoyo, a successful businessman, launched the *Polygamy Awards* to

oppose the secrecy of polygamous marriages and to spread the courage to openly practice polygamy.[21] Commenting on Wardoyo's effort as a polygamy activist, and his use of radio talk-show programs, internet sites, books and magazine Nina Nurmila argues that Wardoyo has exploited the media freedom of the post-New Order era to push his pro-polygamy agenda in Indonesia.[22] The well-publicised polygamous marriage of the popular *Kiai* (Muslim leader), A.A. Gym, has also influenced public debate and attracted both criticism and praise in Indonesian society. In response to this masculinised promotion of polygamy in 2007 more than forty women's groups organised to oppose polygamy. At the time, they held a public demonstration and have continued speaking publicly to urge Indonesian women to oppose polygamy because it is a form of discrimination and violence against women and children.[23] Indeed, polygamy as social practice has become both more open and highly contested in public debate and media in Indonesia since 2003. The arguments for and against polygamy continue to circulate in society as the practice continues to spread. In its portrayal of three different polygamous marriages *Berbagi Suami* has provided an important contribution to the public debate.

The politics of *Berbagi Suami*

23. All the stories in *Berbagi Suami* show the complexity of polygamous families. Salma's family consists of several marriages located in different houses, which means that the husband, Pak Haji, must divide his time and attention between them. Siti's big family lives together in one house where the wives have to practise polygamy completely by sharing husband, children and domestic chores. This big polygamous family can be interpreted as symbolising the overpopulated Javanese family typical of the most overpopulated island in Indonesia. If we read Siti's overpopulated family as a metaphor for Java, and given that the film includes a scene where Sri, the first wife, seeks family planning advice, the film can gesture towards the issue of the lack of access to family planning, and the associated poverty and overpopulation. Ming's polygamous family places her in an ambiguous position as a secret wife. In common public spaces, she has to act as a single young woman but she can be open about her status in front of Koh Abun and his male friends, illustrating the 'brotherhood' that protects a man's secret practice of polygamy.
24. Having sketched the types of polygamous family represented in *Berbagi Suami*, in this section I consider the discourse of gender and polygamy in the film. The section is divided into a discussion of the power of the husband, then of women's resistance and finally of the complexity of relationships in polygamous marriages.

The power of the husbands

25. Although there are different types of polygamous families, *Berbagi Suami* shows the power of the husbands in the gendered division of labour in the family and in the decision-making that leads to polygamous marriage.
26. In all three households in the film, the three main women characters function as stereotypical housewives who have responsibility for both domestic work and children. This rule applies equally for Salma, although she is also a breadwinner, Siti who has no child but becomes *ibu* (mother) for the other wives' children, and Ming who takes on the role of feeding her husband and his male friends when they come to her apartment for a card game. Indeed, *Berbagi Suami* shows that no matter what the type of polygamous marriage, the gendered division of labour in the households remains stereotypical, reflecting the wider socio-cultural relations that reduce women to their domestic roles when they enter the institution of marriage.
27. In terms of the decision to enter a polygamous marriage, *Berbagi Suami* shows how polygamy is legitimised as man's exclusive right. The husbands in this film are those who initiate polygamy, have the power to decide the form of polygamy and take advantage of polygamy. These characters illustrate Blackburn's claim that polygamy is a 'symbol of man's power within marriage.' [24] A man can have more than one wife, while his wives have to share a husband with other wife or wives.

28. In Salma's story Pak Haji is a *tukang kawin* (man who often marries), who neglects to obtain his wife's consent to practise polygamy. By contrast, the film shows that Salma is a devoted wife who accepts her husband's authority although she has to experience again and again the shock that her husband has other *madu* (co-wives).[25]
29. Siti's story is the only one in the film that depicts an official polygamous marriage ceremony. In the wedding scene Pak Lik's smile symbolises men's power, while Siti's tears are symbols of the oppression of a woman entering polygamy. Polygamy is constructed as a victory for the husband but a loss for the wife. Siti's marriage is the last open and legal marriage because Pak Lik takes his fourth wife without the consent of the previous wives (including Siti as the third wife). In this story the film depicts the practice of polygamy by a low paid man who has to support his four wives and seven children in the same small house because of economic limitations. Thus, the film illustrates (and implicitly criticises) the propaganda of Puspo Wardoyo, the founder of the Polygamy Award, who states that poverty should not be an obstacle for polygamy.[26]
30. In the final story *Berbagi Suami* portrays the powerful Koh Abun who successfully persuades Ming to give her body to him exclusively in a secret polygamous marriage. This husband also exercises the right to decide when they should make their marriage public to the first wife. The wedding itself is not portrayed explicitly but it is surmised from dialogue between Koh Abun and his friends. It is clear that it is a secret marriage that has been accomplished by falsifying identification in another city.
31. *Berbagi Suami* portrays the power of husbands over wives particularly in deciding when and how to start polygamous marriages and whether these subsequent marriages will be openly admitted to the previous wife or wives and the public. Interestingly, only in Siti's story are the existing wives involved in proposing marriage. Here, the authority of the husband operates through his wives' complicity.
32. Overall, *Berbagi Suami* shows that husbands practice polygamy out of their desire to have sexual relationships with women other than their existing wife or wives. Moreover, in each case the husbands take an additional wife or wives who are 'more' than the previous wife or wives: usually younger, prettier and sexier.

Women's (wives') resistance

33. The power of husbands is not the only story. *Berbagi Suami* also portrays the resistance of women in polygamous marriages. The first story shows Salma accepting her husband's decision to practice polygamy in order to maintain her identity as a good Muslim wife and mother. As a good Muslim wife, Salma accept Pak Haji's decision to marry another because he wants to avoid *zinah* (adultery). In addition, as a good mother, Salma tries to convince her only son, Nadim, to be patient in experiencing his father's polygamy since she believes that polygamy is her destiny. However, she is not wholly oppressed in this relationship and finally resists Pak Haji's authority when she rejects his invitation to accompany him to Aceh. Here, Salma establishes autonomy.
34. In the second story, Siti becomes her 'uncle's' third wife because she has no power to reject his proposal. She feels reluctant to reject the proposal of marriage initiated by Pak Lik and his wives because she has no job and nowhere to live in Jakarta. However, Siti's powerlessness finally ends when she finds the courage to leave in a more fulfilling relationship with one of her co-wives. Siti is the only woman character in this film that is active in ending her polygamous situation.
35. Unlike Siti and Salma, Ming negotiates two identities, that of single young woman and secret second wife. This ambiguity illustrates the husband's power to disclose, or not. As a secret wife, Ming must let her husband determine the time when he will disclose their marriage. However, the film also suggests that Ming takes advantages of her single status, especially when she decides to start her career as a movie star. Further, Ming's single status will also be

of use when she starts an independent life after being left by Koh Abun.

36. Clearly, in their own ways all three women disrupt narratives of the 'good wife' which could otherwise function to enclose them totally in polygamous relationships.

The complexity of relationships in polygamous families

37. *Berbagi Suami* is not only about the relationship between a wife and her polygamous husband. The film also considers the multiple relationships within polygamy and their dynamic nature. Relationships exist not only between a husband and his wives, but also among wives, children and parents, a wife and other wives' children, and among children that have the same father but a different mother. These relationships are dynamic and *Berbagi Suami* offers a range of representations of women surviving and resisting the socio-cultural conditions which sanction the practice of polygamy.
38. *Berbagi Suami* depicts a variety of relationships between wives. All the wives are portrayed as suffering in one way or another. In general in Indonesia the first wife has more privileges as she is the main wife while the other wives are additional wives.[27] This privilege comes, however, at a cost as the first wife Salma experiences polygamy for years and struggles to manage painful feelings and jealousy. In Siti's story, although she is treated as a sister by the other wives, competition to generate 'the loudest noise in the bed' becomes an important issue among wives. Although not explicitly expressed by the wives, they do have painful feelings and must bear the physical and economic burdens of an increasingly stretched household. Finally, although Ming already knows of Cik Linda's existence, she seems to not only have to control her jealousy, but she has to compete with Cik Linda to get Koh Abun's time and attention. Ming is portrayed as very happy during a period of Cik Linda's absence when she can temporarily be a full time wife. However, Ming must face Cik Linda's anger when she becomes aware of Koh Abun's (and Ming's) deception. Here, the film constructs polygamy as a threat to a married woman whose anger is directed against the other wife rather than the deceitful husband.
39. The relationship between a wife and her co-wives' children is depicted in three ways. The relationship between Salma and other wives' children is represented formally. Salma is not close to the other wives' children. In contrast, Siti and the other wives' children are close to each other. The children call Siti *ibu* (mother) as Siti acts in a parenting role. The relationship between Ming and Cik Linda's daughters is tense. These daughters cast Ming as the villain of polygamy because her position as second wife is associated with *perempuan genit* (the flirtatious woman) who disrupts the primary relationship.
40. In the relationships between children and their fathers in polygamous families, the film depicts children's cynicism towards their fathers. Nadim, Pak Haji's son by Salma, is the most cynical child in the polygamous families. Nadim's disapproval of his father is shown in his sneering facial expression and his refusal to be involved in his father's activities. Cik Linda's daughters are portrayed as disagreeing with their father's decision when they attack Ming. The relationship between the wife (the main character) and her children is only discussed in Salma's story because neither Siti nor Ming have offspring. The relationship between Salma and Nadim reflects the dynamics of a changing relationship between a mother and a son. Although Nadim consistently shows his disappointment in his mother's acceptance of polygamy, he is portrayed as a good son who always supports his mother and becomes his mother's best friend.
41. In its representation of the relationships among offspring, although this constitutes only a small part of the film, *Berbagi Suami* shows how polygamy creates confusion in offspring. Young Nadim questions whether Ica is *adik angkat* (adoptive sister) or not and questions whether she will stay with him or not.
42. *Berbagi Suami's* representation of these complex and tangled family relationships demonstrates the multiplicity of relationships that are generated by polygamy. They suggest a complex exercise of power, represented through the feelings expressed by the various members of polygamous marriages. In this context the film makes two important points. First,

women engage in intra-familial negotiations as they occupy multiple positions, functioning as wives, mothers or even as single young women. This process of negotiating the complexities presented by polygamous family structures shows that the power relations between a wife and other family members are dynamic and never fixed. As a consequence of this dynamic, these relationships are open to change. Women engage with and confront the possibilities for transformation in their circumstances through a range of strategies, at times resisting their husband's power to direct the course of the polygamous marriage. As each woman navigates the tensions between acceptance and resistance, the relations of power between husband and wives shift offering women possibilities for agency.

Multiple arenas of contestation on polygamy

43. In addition to situating polygamy as a form of marriage and family relationships, *Berbagi Suami* intervenes into the religious, cultural and economic dimensions of the discourse about polygamy in Indonesia.
44. The dominant discourse about polygamy in Indonesia is associated with Islam. Both Salma's and Siti's stories situate polygamy within Islam, although from different class perspectives. Borrowing Clifford Geertz's account in describing Islam in Java, Salma's story represents polygamy in a *priyayi* (upper class) and *santri* (devout) Javanese family while Siti's story represents polygamy in an *abangan* (lower class) Muslim family, where Islam is influenced by Hindu-Javanese practices.[28]
45. In Salma's story, the debate about Islam's perspective on polygamy is built into the scene of the talk show where a Muslim anti-polygamy activist confronts Salma. In their short dialogue, Salma and Professor Arni have conflicting opinions about the important requirement stated in the Qur'an that fairness should be the basis for men entering polygamy. Although this debate is not explored further in the film, the talk show scene shows the publicly contested nature of polygamy in Islam. The debate about polygamy and Islam is also found in Salma's explanation to her son Nadim that polygamy is a woman's fate. Salma is devout, and therefore accepts Qur'anic interpretations legitimising the practice, but she also uses Islam to gain some basis for negotiation. Salma demands that her husband take *wudhlu* (water to purify himself) before he enters her house.
46. In Salma's story, sexuality is an issue closely related to religion. Pak Haji's reason for practising polygamy is to avoid *zinah* (sex outside marriage), the most common reason for practising polygamy in Indonesia.[29] Male sexual desire is clearly privileged in both the Islamic religion and Indonesian culture. In presenting the relationship between sexuality and religion, however, *Berbagi Suami* chooses not to show sexual scenes between Pak Haji and Salma or his other wives. It seems that the director wants to respect a devout Muslim audience who believe that the sexual relationship between husband and wife is a private matter that should not be explored in the public space of film. However, there are semi-explicit sexual scenes depicted in both Siti's and Ming's stories.
47. There is no accurate data about when polygamy started in Java. However, Koentjaraningrat's historical-anthropological study on polygamy in Javanese culture states that polygamy created different status among those who practiced it.[30] Polygamy not only gave higher status to the husband over the wife or wives, but created different status levels among the wives. Koentjaraningrat explains that under Dutch colonisation (1600–1900), polygamy gave the *garwa padmi* (main wife who comes from high class status) higher status over the *garwa ampi* (other wives who usually comes from lower-class status). Polygamy continues as a mechanism that distributes status in modern Indonesia.
48. In Siti's story, where a less elite and more traditional form of Javanese culture is portrayed, Siti's acceptance of the group marriage proposal has deep cultural roots. Siti is reluctant to reject the proposal from Pak Lik and his wives because they are kind to her. The way the wives are represented as helping each other with domestic chores, raising children and serving the husband as the central figure by turns is similar to the story of King and concubines in the old Javanese empire of the pre-Islamic era.[31] At that time, polygamy was a common practice for

Javanese aristocrats who had unlimited numbers of *selir* or secondary wives. In these polygamous relationships, the requirement that the wife be devoted to her husband no matter how he acted symbolised the ideology of *wedi lan bekti ing laki* or the wife's obedience and submission.[32] In this story, the wives give complete and total submission to the husband's desire and authority, at least until Siti convinces Dwi to leave.

49. The issue of culture in Siti's story is tightly related to sexuality which is the main theme of Pak Lik's relationship with his wives. His power in his domain, the main bedroom, constructs a celebration of the phallus in this small house. Pak Lik himself is a symbol of the insatiable phallus. All his wives are positioned as sex providers, his first wife being the most devoted. Her pleasure in bed symbolises the ideology of sexual pleasure in traditional Javanese terms, *minakjinggo* or *miring enak jengking monggo* (all positions are acceptable).[33] Siti is the only character who is not sexually interested in Pak Lik. Ironically, this Javanese celebration of the phallus comes to an end with the betrayal of the two wives, Siti and Dwi, who form an intimate relationship with each other. The film thus locates female-female sexual relationships as part of Javanese culture, with roots in the pre-Islamic Javanese empire.[34] In addition, Siti's and Dwi's decision to escape from Pak Lik's polygamous family shows that women have the power to reject phallogocentric sexuality and polygamy at the same time.
50. Ming's story is located primarily in the context of economics, partly via the association of Chinese-Indonesian culture with business and wealth.[35] The ideology of economics in Ming's story is tightly connected to the issue of sexuality which is represented for her through the ownership of her body. Polygamy, made possible for Koh Abun because of his wealth, becomes a way for men to take possession of another woman's body beside the body of the first wife. What Koh Abun wants from his secret marriage to Ming is the power to be the only one who has bodily access to her. But in an ironical twist, his body is not Ming's possession; rather the first legitimate wife dominates it.

Conclusion

51. As a drama about a controversial topic, *Berbagi Suami* has received a great variety of responses. John Badalu states that the film has received good response from audiences in big cities like Jakarta and Bandung but not from the rural cities where it has been screened.[36] The film has stirred controversy and public debate. Not all of the Indonesian Muslim community accept the film's critique of the practice of polygamy. When Dinata promoted the film in a radio talkshow several men called to register their objection.[37] The film not only cinematically represents discourse about polygamy but has become a contribution to the discourse of polygamy in Indonesia in the wider context.
52. While *Berbagi Suami* is clearly a film about women, and offers the point of view of women in polygamous marriages, one of the most interesting aspects of the film is that opposition to polygamy comes not only from women but also from men. The adult son, Nadim, is consistently represented in the first story arguing with his mother's decision to accept polygamy. He shows disrespect to his father for initiating polygamy without Salma's consent. Arguably *Berbagi Suami* positions Nadim as a representation of attitudes for a contemporary post New Order Indonesia. Another young man who voices an anti polygamy position is Firman, Ming's friend. Although Firman does not reject polygamy as explicitly as Nadim, he lets Ming know what other people think of her status as Koh Abun's secret wife. Firman also encourages Ming to think about her career. The film thus shows opposition to polygamy coming from young single men, suggesting that in the future these men will not practise this form of marriage. Further amplifying the anti-polygamy position is Pak Haji, the (old) man who is *tukang kawin* (a man who often marries). On his deathbed, Pak Haji advises Nadim not to practise polygamy in the future. The other two main husband characters (Pak Lik and Koh Abun) are represented as genuine pro-polygamy advocates. Pak Lik is a patriarchal husband who demands his wives' obedience and acceptance. His power to practise open polygamous marriage is shored up by his wives' submission. In contrast, Koh Abun is portrayed as a husband dependent on his wife, Cik Linda, so that he persuades Ming to be married to him secretly.
53. Although the film shows that it is men (husbands) who initiate polygamy, the choice to stay or

to leave polygamous marriages is not in the husbands' hands. The first story shows Salma actively choosing to stay in her marriage, while in the second Siti finds the courage to leave. The last story shows Ming's ambivalence: she wants to stay in her secret marriage because of the financial security it offers, but at the same time wants to take advantage of being a single beautiful young woman to start her career as a movie star. Ming's subsequent independence is not solely her own choice, as Koh Abun and family move to the U.S., but she accepts her fate with faith in herself.

54. The film shows that opposition to polygamy is not only a woman's position. Despite the fact that men tend to initiate polygamy, the arguments for and against polygamy are not exclusively related to gender. The film suggests that all polygamous families have complex problems that are not easy to handle. Polygamy causes trouble for all involved, but an end to these troubles will come only from shared efforts by men and women to eliminate the practice. [0] The strength of the film's criticisms of polygamy in Indonesia has been commented on by some film critics. Indonesian critic Eric Sasono claims that *Berbagi Suami* is a strong and satirical cultural commentary that opposes polygamy. [38] Iranian film analyst, Bijan Tehrani, states that *Berbagi Suami* is a political film because it makes a strong statement against polygamy in Indonesia. [39] Commenting on this interpretation Dinata states that 'I never call my movie a political one. But I can't stop other people having the opinion that is political.' [40] Just as her film presents its critique of polygamy in *soft* ways, Dinata's statement can be read as admitting that *Berbagi Suami* was created to oppose polygamy in Indonesia. It does this within the limits and prohibitions of Indonesian film and religious culture, but succeeds in creating a discursive space for the representation of women's experiences of polygamy.

Endnotes

[1] This article is derived from the author's Masters Thesis which was completed in the Department of Women's Studies at Flinders University in 2007. A paper based on the thesis was presented at the 14th South East Asian Women's Conference at Monash University and in the Gender in Indonesia Symposium held by the Department of Women's Studies at Flinders University, both in 2007.

[2] Dinata estimated this percentage when she conducted research to prepare the film's script. See 'Film launches debate on polygamy in Muslim Indonesia,' in *Sawf News*, 8 April 2006, online: <http://news.sawf.org/entertainment/10231.aspx>, accessed 15 March 2007. The only official data about polygamy was reported by the 1920 census that figured only 1.5 per cent of husbands in Java were polygamous. Another census held in the Dutch era in the 1930 census reported 2.6 per cent polygamous marriages in the Indonesian region. See Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 114.

[3] The term polygamy comes from the Greek words *apolus* (many) and *gamos* (marriage) that means many marriages. While polygyny comes from *apolus* (many) and *gunē* (women) that means many women or wives and polyandry comes from *apolus* (many) and *aner* (men). Therefore, polygamous marriage means either having more than one wife (polygyny) or husband (polyandry) at one time. See L. Nurohmah, 'Poligami saatnya melihat realitas' in *Jurnal Perempuan: Menimbang Poligami*, no 31 (2003):33–45; J. Cairncross, *After Polygamy was made a Sin: The Social History of Christian Polygamy*, London: Routledge, 1974, p. A; and B. Radjab, 'Meninjau poligami: perspektif antropologis dan keharusan mengubahnya' in *Jurnal Perempuan: Menimbang Poligami*, no. 31 (2003):67–84.

[4] *Berbagi Suami* (Love for Share), directed by Nia Di Nata (VCD), Kalyana Shira Films, 2006.

[5] Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order*, London: Zed Books, 1994, p. 157.

[6] Sen, *Indonesian Cinema*, p. 157.

[7] Two years after *Berbagi Suami*, another Indonesian film about relationships between men and women touches on the subject of polygamy, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love) dir. Hanung Bramantyo. The film, described by some as a religious film, shows different views about polygamy but also justifies polygamy via reference to Qur'anic verses.

[8] *Pak Haji* is the title for a man who has gone through a pilgrimage to Mecca. He therefore represents an élite man in social life as he is assumed to be a good faithful Muslim who has made an important religious contribution to society.

[9] *Pak Lik* is a special name in Javanese culture for the younger brother of someone's mother or father (uncle).

[10] Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, p. 113.

[11] Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, p. 115; Koentjaraningrat 'Meninjau poligami: perspektif antropologis dan keharusan mengubahnya,' in B. Radjab, *Jurnal Perempuan: Menimbang Poligami*, no. 31 (2003):67–84, p. 72.

[12] T.L. Webster, 'Beyond the "closet": the voices of lesbian women,' in *Yogyakarta, Research Report, the Centre for Women's Studies* (Pusat Studi Wanita), IAIN (State Institute of Islamic Studies) Yogyakarta: Sunan Kalijaga, 2004, p. 5. The story of female intimacy is illustrated by the stories of the closeness of the Sultan's wives of Taman Sari (Javanese Court) and the reliefs that cover the Borobudur Temple. Although historically female-to-female relationship occupied a traditional role in Indonesia especially in Java, Gayatri states that female homosexuality has been less common than male homosexuality. See B.J.D. Gayatri, 'Indonesian lesbians writing their own script: issues of feminism and sexuality,' in *Amazon to Zami: Towards a Global Lesbian Feminism*, ed. M. Reinfelder, New York: Cassell Press, 1996, pp. 86–97, p. 90.

[13] Radjab, 'Meninjau poligami: perspektif antropologis dan keharusan mengubahnya,' p. 74.

[14] D. Gunawan, 'Otonomi, syariat Islam, dan politisasi gender: catatan kritis wacana poligami dan demokrasi di Indonesia,' in *Wacana Poligami di Indonesia*, ed. R Machali, Bandung: Mizan, 2005, pp. 95–111, pp. 102–03.

[15] Gunawan, 'Otonomi, syariat Islam, dan politisasi gender,' p. 103.

[16] F. Rahman, 'A survey of modernization of Muslim family law,' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 11 (1980):451–65, p. 451.

[17] S. Butt, 'Polygamy and mixed married in Indonesia: the application of marriage law in the courts,' in *Indonesia Law and Society*, ed. T. Lindsey, Sydney, New South Wales: Federation Press, 1999, pp. 122–141, p. 122.

[18] For a discussion of mixed marriage, *adapt* and Islam in Bugis, Sulawesi see Nurul Ilmi Idrus, 'Behind the notion of siala: marriage, *adat* and Islam among the Bugis in South Sulawesi,' in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, no. 10 (2004), online: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue10/idrus.html>, accessed 24 October 2008.

[19] LBH APIK (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Asosiasi Perempuan Indonesia Untuk Keadilan/Legal Aid Society For Indonesian Women) in V. Reyneta, 'Kebijakan poligami: kekerasan negara terhadap perempuan,' in *Jurnal Perempuan: Menimbang Poligami*, no. 31 (2003):7–17, p. 10.

[20] LBH APIK in Reyneta, 'Kebijakan poligami,' p. 31.

[21] Ellen Nakashima, 'Debating polygamy's resurgence: Indonesians divided over meaning of Koran,' in *Washington Post*, 28 November 2003, online: <http://www.polygamyinfo.com/intnlmedia%20plyg%20221wapost.htm>, accessed March 1, 2006 (no longer available). See instead Ellen Nakashima, online: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1P2-319370.html>.

[22] N. Nurmila, 2005, 'Polygamy and chickens': this man's message is simple – four wives are better for business than one,' in *Inside Indonesia*, no. 83 (July–September 2005):19–20, p. 19. In his pro-polygamy activities, Puspo Wardoyo always claims to be the self-styled president of polygamy. In his franchise grilled-chicken restaurants he provides special juice called polygamy juice, a four-fruit juice that he claims has become the favourite on his menu. See Puspo Wardoyo, 'Kampanye Poligamor Presiden Poligami,' in *Gatra Magazine*, online: <http://www.gatra.com/2003-04-21/artikel.php?pil=23&id=27357>, 21 April 2003, accessed 3 May 2007.

[23] 'Selamat hari Ibu: Tolak Poligami,' in *Perspektif Online*, 21 December 2006, online: http://www.perspektif.net/article/article.php?article_id=488, accessed 3 May 2007.

[24] Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, p. 113.

[25] Literally *madu* means honey but it is also an analogy for the extra wives. The term shows that polygamy means sweetness in terms of the male perspective. It comes from the analogy of women as honey and men as bees who drink their nectar. See Megan Jennaway, *Sisters and Lovers: Women and Desire in Bali*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 271, cited in Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, p. 111.

[26] K. Poerwandari, 'Ilusi poligami,' in *Jurnal Perempuan: Menimbang Poligami*, no. 31 (2003):19–30, p. 26).

[27] Nurul Ilmi Idrus, 'Poligini: perdebatan publik, hukum dan budaya,' in *Perempuan dan hukum: menuju hukum yang berperspektif kesetaraan dan keadilan*, Yakarta: Yayasan Obor, 2006, p. 247.

[28] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1960.

[29] LBH APIK in Reyneta, 'Kebijakan poligami,' p. 31.

[30] Radjab, 'Meninjau poligami,' p. 72.

[31] L.Z. Munir, 'Misunderstanding of polygamy lingers in Islam,' in *Jakarta Post*, 24 May 2003.

[32] S.S. Sukri and R. Sofyan, *Perempuan dan Seksualitas Dalam Tradisi Jawa*, Yogyakarta: Gama Media, 2001, pp. 6–7.

[33] This idiom is popular in Javanese adults' conversation to represent openness to all sex-positions.

[34] B.J.D. Gayatri, 'Indonesian lesbian writing their own script,' in *Amazon to Zami: Towards a Global Lesbian Feminism*, ed. M. Reinfelder, New York: Cassell, 1996, pp. 86–97, p. 90. The term *lesbian* is rarely used in Indonesia. Gayatri argues that 'lesbian' has been rejected by many Indonesian non-heterosexual women since it is associated with a negative image of female homosexuality. Lesbianism in Indonesia is associated with feminism and both are viewed as oppositional to government authority which privileges maternity. The term 'female homosexual' can avoid such women being stigmatised in this way. See T.L. Webster, 'Beyond the "closet",' p. 10.

[35] L. Suryadinata, 'Chinese politics in Post-Suharto's Indonesia: beyond the ethnic approach,' in *Asian Survey*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2001):502–24, p. 503.

[36] John Badalu, 'Is the local film industry undergoing a revival?,' in *Jakarta Post*, Review 2006 Features, online: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/review/feat05.asp>, accessed 20 February 2007.

[37] Jane Perlez, 'Cinéma vérité: portrait of Indonesian polygamy,' in the *International Herald Tribune: Asia – Pacific*, 12 September 2006, online: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/08/09/news/letter.php>, accessed 20 February 2007.

[38] Eric Sasono, 'Berbagi suami: pertanyaan dua sisi,' *Eric Sasono*, 20 September 2006, online: <http://www.ericsasono.blogspot.com>, accessed 3 May 2007. Sasono's article won best film critique in FFI (Festival Film Indonesia/the Indonesian Film Festival) 2006.

[39] Bijan Tehrani, 'Love for Share deals with the polygamy in Indonesia today,' in *Cinema without Borders*, 3 March 2007, online: <http://www.cinemawithoutborders.com/news/127/ARTICLE/2007-03-03.html>, accessed 20 February 2007.

[40] Dinata in B. Tehrani, 'Love for Share deals with the polygamy in Indonesia today,' in *Cinema without Borders*, 3 March 2007, online: <http://www.cinemawithoutborders.com/news/127/ARTICLE/2007-03-03.html>, accessed 20 February 2007.

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